

Mission, Values and Vision

*⁸To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, ⁹and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things, ¹⁰so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.
(Ephesians 3:8-10. ESV)*

Message 9

The Importance Of Corporate Worship

March 16th, 2014

Hebrews 10:19-25

Rev. Paul Carter

Introduction:

Good morning! Open your Bibles to Hebrews 10:19-25. We're looking this morning at one of the passages that informs our 8th and final Core Value. That Core Value reads as follows:

We deeply believe in the priority and importance of corporate worship. We need to sit together under God's Word and to be led by the Holy Spirit in transformative and engaging response through songs, offerings and acts of confession.

As I mentioned on February 23rd when we were speaking about our 5th Core Value and the issue of "word and deed" in Christian ministry, most of these Core Values would have occurred as naturally to our grandparents as they do to us, but a few of them are culturally located and that is certainly the case with this one. I can't imagine that our grandparents would have felt the need to highlight the importance of corporate worship. To be a church was to gather together for Christian worship. Stating this as a Core Value would be seen as redundant like a person whose personal life plan included not being hit by a truck. Life plans assume continued living and church plans tend to assume corporate worship but in our generation that is starting to change. For the first time in a very long time, that is starting to change. Just last month a well known Evangelical leader, from the "Emergent camp" came out on his blog and admitted that he did not regularly attend church and did not really enjoy corporate worship and really didn't feel all that bad about it. He was not abandoning his faith in Jesus, he was just questioning whether gathering with God's people was really a necessary part of being a Christian. He preferred listening to

podcasts while walking or gardening. He didn't really enjoy sitting in a pew beside people he did not know or like and listening to sermons and singing songs that were not really his cup of tea. He said that work, recreation and Christian conversation provided all the worship and spiritual input that he required. Well, as you can imagine, this ignited something of a firestorm in the wider Christian world and it even reached as far as our own little town. Life 100.3 decided to jump in on the action and they hosted a call in show asking the question: "Do Christians really need to go to church?" The phone lines were then jammed with people calling in, bursting with enthusiastic testimonials of how their Christian lives are ever so fulfilled despite never attending corporate worship. Life 100.3 once again demonstrated how firmly they are rooted in the shallow end of the Evangelical pool by offering no commentary on this whatsoever – either hoping not to offend, or more likely, simply being too ignorant to know stupid when they step in it – and they simply left the audience assuming that the issue had been decided by call in democracy. According to the call log we no longer need to gather together for corporate worship in order to be Christians. We simply need to feel fond of Jesus and leave our radios tuned to Life 100.3. Or if that logic doesn't satisfy – we could open our Bibles to Hebrews 10:19-26 which seems to say something altogether different. Let me read the text to you in full – in Greek it is actually all one sentence – and then we'll divide it into its four component parts before dealing at greater length with the implication of the fourth and final section. Hear now the Word of the Lord:

Hebrews 10:19-25 (ESV)

¹⁹ Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus,

²⁰ by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh,

²¹ and since we have a great priest over the house of God,

²² let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

²³ Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful.

²⁴ And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works,

²⁵ not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

As I mentioned, in Greek this is one long sentence made up of four logically related clauses. There is first a foundational indicative followed by three hortatory subjunctives. That isn't as complicated as it sounds. An indicative is a straight forward statement of fact. It's a form of the

word “indicate”. The apostle¹ simply points at a truth that then forms the foundation for three exhortations or commands. He says: “This thing is true therefore do these three things”. We’ll look at the text according to those four divisions. First of all then, let’s take a look at the foundational indicative.

Foundational Truth: Christ Has Opened The Way

We see that in verses 19-20:

Hebrews 10:19-20 (ESV)

¹⁹ Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus,

²⁰ by the new and living way that he opened for us ...

The phrase “he opened for us” is in the indicative, meaning that the new way opened for us by Christ is the foundation for everything else the Apostle is about to say. Everything we do as Christians we can only do because of what Jesus did. We can only worship, we can only pray, we can only serve because of what God has done in Christ to secure our redemption. The word the Apostle uses here is very interesting, it is the Greek word *enekainisen* which literally means “he inaugurated”. Like a new highway that never existed before – like the 407 – this is not a road improvement, this is not a lane widening, this is a whole new road. The old roads got you close-ish, the old roads gave you a sort of “drive by” experience of God so that you could sort of see him from a distance – but this new road goes straight into the heart of God and beckons us to follow.

John 14:6 (ESV)

“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

Jesus is the way, he is the new road; a road that verse 20 says is “through his flesh”. Meaning, this new, bold, intimate access that we have now to God is only possible because of the life, death, resurrection and session of Jesus Christ. It is by his flesh; that is by the totality of his LIFE. That is what we mean when we pray and worship in Jesus’ Name. I’ve told you before that “in Jesus’ Name” is not a magic phrase that we tack on to the end of prayers – in fact there is not a single prayer in the New Testament that contains that exact phrase – rather it means that we

¹ I am aware that scholars are no longer united in their understanding of authorship. Some say Paul, others Barnabas, others Paul and Barnabas together still others someone else. Given the lack of consensus I will use “the apostle” throughout without specification.

understand that we can only draw near to God because of all of who Jesus IS and all of what Jesus DID. It is on the basis of Jesus' life and work that we pray and worship.

Here is why that is important, practically speaking. What the author is saying is that if you are in Christ, your prayers and your worship are guaranteed to get through to God. Jews were used to worshipping from a distance and they were used to being somewhat unsure about whether their prayers would get through. Jews after all, could not go into the presence of God – only the high priest could do that and only once a year. Everyone else stood far off. Then there was the matter of the sinfulness of the high priest. He might be a sinner – all of them were – and if he didn't properly atone for his own sins before entering, the whole process could go awry. It might all be for not! Not so, under the new covenant, not so with respect to this new way. The new way is Christ and he always gets through, indeed as Hebrews 7:25 says, he ever lives before the Father to make intercession for us. If you are in Christ, then you LIVE THROUGH CHRIST EVER in the presence of God. Are you hearing that upgrade? Under the Old Covenant, one guy went in to the presence of God once a year on behalf of everybody, maybe ineffectively, but now, in Christ WE LIVE in the presence of God continually and all our prayers and all our worship are given to God through the intercession not of a sinful High Priest, but of a sinless and perfect Son. Your worship, your prayer – IF YOU ARE IN CHRIST – is near to the Father's ear and ever in his sight.

What that means then, is that whether or not your prayer is effective, whether or not our worship “gets through” has nothing to do with how you feel or how well you think you did it. Do you understand? People say sometimes: “I felt like my prayer didn't get through” or “I didn't feel the presence of the Lord today in worship.” To which I want to reply – but I don't: “What possible difference could that make?” Your feelings are completely irrelevant and highly unreliable. Think of it like this; when you send an email, do you then sit back and assess your feelings about the potential successful transmission of that email? Do you say: “I do not feel like that email is going to get through. When I sent that email I was not really FEELING IT. Something was off in my spirit.” No! Whether the email gets through or not has nothing to do with our feelings – it has to do with the security and effectiveness of our network. So it is in Christ. Christ IS THE NETWORK and everything we send to God in Christ gets through. Its an open door, it's a wide open highway beckoning us deeper into the heart of God.

That is what the Apostle presents as INDICATIVE FACT. Totally cut off and indifferent to your feelings. It is a FACT that Christ has opened a way straight to the heart of the Father through his life, death, resurrection and session. Now, on the basis of that fact, the Apostle gives three exhortations. If that's true – and it is – then we need to do this:

Three Exhortations:

1. We should draw near

Look at verse 22:

Hebrews 10:22 (ESV)

²² **let us draw near** with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

There are two ways you can translate a hortatory subjunctive; one is by saying “Let us” and the other is by saying “We should” – they mean exactly the same but in English we don't tend to use the phrase “Let us” as much anymore and it doesn't communicate the sense of command that it used to. We tend to hear “let us” as a suggestion that we can obey or not, it lacks the sense of “oughtness” to some. It shouldn't. In Greek it is very clear that these are three commands rooted in an indicative fact. If this is true we must do so and so. If a way to God has been opened, we must follow it. That is the idea reiterated two chapters later when he says:

Hebrews 12:1-2 (ESV)

¹ Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, **let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.**

² looking to Jesus, **the founder and perfecter** of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

That is the exact same idea only this time the indicative foundation is slightly different. In chapter 12 the Apostle is saying, given that the nature of saving faith hasn't changed, given that we must walk forward in the promises of God – let us get on with it! Let us forsake sin and run the race of faith, keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus the “founder and perfecter” or as some of your Bibles have it “the pioneer/author and perfecter”. Same idea. Jesus went first – Jesus INAUGURATED a new way – FOLLOW IT. Draw near unto God in Christ!

The Apostle is saying, very simply: “An invitation from God requires a response from you.” So MOVE! Go through the narrow gate and walk the narrow way.

Jesus himself was very stern in his warning to those who would refuse God’s invitation to draw near. In the parable of the banquet he spoke of people who were too busy and too self important to respond to the king’s invitation. “I’m too busy, I’ve just been married, I have fields and commitments – I’m very important and I cannot come.” How did the king react to this rebellion? Jesus tells us:

Matthew 22:7 (ESV)

⁷ The king was angry, and he sent his troops and destroyed those murderers and burned their city.

The Gospel obligates response. Think about that today if you mean to leave here in order to consider at your leisure the gift of grace that is in Jesus Christ. It always amazes me how people can say: “I’m thinking about committing my life to Christ but I’m not quite ready. I have debts to pay or a relationship to sever or a pleasure to first indulge in but then later, perhaps, when the time is right, I will come to God in Christ”. Fool! Who knows but that this very night your life will be required of you and what will you say for yourself when you face the wrath of the king? Hebrews 10 goes on to say, immediately following our passage:

Hebrews 10:30-31 (ESV)

³⁰ For we know him who said, “Vengeance is mine; I will repay.” And again, “The Lord will judge his people.”

³¹ **It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.**

A way has been opened for you to return to God. At present you are dead in your sins and under his curse and wrath. Think not to answer for your own sins. To do so is to spurn the blood of Christ and to despise his mercy. Do not do it. Let go your sins and cast yourself on Christ.

Psalm 2:12 (ESV)

¹² Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are all who take refuge in him.

Secondly, based on the foundational fact of Jesus Christ and the way he has opened through his life, death, resurrection and session, the apostle says:

2. We should hold fast

Look at verse 23:

Hebrews 10:23 (ESV)

²³ **Let us hold fast** the confession of our hope **without wavering**, for he who promised is faithful.

Holding fast and not wavering have been common themes throughout this epistle. The apostle said earlier:

Hebrews 3:6 (ESV)

⁶ but Christ is faithful over God's house as a son. And we are his house **if indeed we hold fast** our confidence and our boasting in our hope.

Later in chapter 3 he says:

Hebrews 3:14 (ESV)

¹⁴ For we have come to share in Christ, **if indeed we hold our original confidence firm** to the end.

Clearly for the Apostle, faithfulness and perseverance in the Apostolic Gospel was definitional to the nature of real and saving faith. How do you tell real Christians from false Christians?

Simple, he says, watch for the ones who STAND FIRM in the Apostolic, unchanging Biblical Gospel. You know the blueprint, you know the outline of God's house, having been laid down with the Apostles as foundation and Christ as cornerstone, therefore, if you see someone lay their stone on that foundation and leave it there, you know they are in the house, if they start trying to build a new wing 2000 stories up in the air, then you know, that those people will not stand. They will fall and end in ruin.

If Christ has opened a way then you do not need to open any new ways! Just stick to the old way! Listen, friends this one is real easy. If you want to know who is walking the way of Jesus and who is walking their own way just ask them what they believe. If they believe something that your Christian grandparents did not believe then they are out on a limb building their own wing 2000 stories up in the air. They will fall. New ideas may persist for a generation or so, but in the end they cannot hold the weight of their own baseless suppositions. There is no foundation. Ask them for a verse, ask them how it is that they have come to these new conclusions about Christian life and church and doctrine and sexuality and gender and all these

wonderful new ideas – where do they base them? On what teaching of Jesus? On what Apostolic foundation stone do they locate this new doctrine? If they have none, then, according to the Apostle, they are not of the house. If Jesus has opened a way, then no new ways are required. Trust in the old ways and hold fast.

Thirdly, and lastly, if Jesus has opened a way straight into the heart of the Father, then:

3. We should consider

Now, the grammar on this one is a little more convoluted because it includes a negative contrast. The hortatory subjunctive here is the Greek word *katano-omen* which you see at the start of verse 24:

Hebrews 10:24 (ESV)

²⁴ And **let us consider** ...

The clause goes on to speak of some of the positive effects and values of corporate worship as contrasted to the low value that some were placing on the church assemblies. Putting it all together into one exhortation that makes sense in English we might say: “We should consider the value of corporate life and worship”.

Why would the Apostle feel the need to say this? As I mentioned off the top, something is happening in our generation that hasn’t happened in a very long time. The last time it happened on this scale, to the best of my knowledge, was likely back at the end of the Apostolic generation. Adolph Harnack, the church historian, wrote about this time period saying:

There were naturally some people who imagined that once could secure the holy contents and blessings of Christianity as one did those of Isis and the Magna Mater, and then withdraw. Or, in cases where people were not so short-sighted, levity, laziness, or weariness were often enough to detach a person from the society. A vainglorious sense of superiority, and of being able to dispense with the spiritual aid of the society, was also the means of inducing many to withdraw from fellowship and from the common worship. Many, too, were actuated by fear of the authorities; they shunned attendance at public worship, to avoid being recognized as Christians.²

² A. Harnack, *Mission and Expansion of Christianity*, E.T. (London, 1908), 434 as cited in Bruce, *The Epistle To The Hebrews Revised*.

We know that this is very early in Christian history, before AD 70, perhaps in the early AD 60's, before the persecution of Nero, before Christians had been kicked all the way out of the Jewish synagogues. The word used in verse 25 is actually a unique word, *episunagogen* which means "over and above church" or "over and above synagogue". The first Christian church services were thought of as "extra church" because they were in addition to Jewish synagogue worship. Then, after the Christians were fully expelled from the Jewish religion, church worship was just church worship, it wasn't "extra church worship", it was all that there was. The point is that the Apostle is telling them not to neglect these special and regular meetings. The early Christians met on the first day of the week for Christian worship and the Apostle knew that if they neglected these assemblies, they would slide back into Judaism, or slide right out of faith altogether. Some are doing it, he says, DO NOT BE LIKE THEM.

Go to church – GO TO EXTRA CHURCH – because you need it, he says, to be provoked to love and good deeds. The word used for "provoke" or "to stir" is actually a very strong word. It is used to describe the argument that Paul and Barnabas had back in Acts 15. It is a word that suggests conflict. The author is saying that church – corporate life and corporate worship – will provide the stiff kick in the pants you need as a naturally lazy and self indulgent person, to grow and carry on in your faith. Church is not supposed to be soothing – it is supposed to feel confrontational! If you fall asleep in church there is something seriously wrong, either with the preacher or with you. Sometimes both. Worship – if its CHRISTIAN worship – should feel like an assault on your flesh. You should leave feeling like all the sin in you has been attacked by the holiness of God and the truthfulness of his word. That's what you need – CONSIDER HOW YOU NEED THAT – the apostle says, to grow in love and good deeds. What gets in the way of love and good deeds? YOU! Your flesh. Your need to eat all of what God gives you. What's the answer to that? WORSHIP! Worship ought to shrink your you and grow your God. That ought to help grow your love and your serve. Go to church. Go to extra church. Consider how much you need it.

And then the Apostle adds this last phrase:

Hebrews 10:25 (ESV)

and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

Contra Donald Miller, contra Life 100.3, our need for corporate worship does not diminish over time, rather it intensifies – ALL THE MORE as we see the day approaching. What day and why more?

Matthew Henry in his commentary says that the ultimate meaning of “the Day” is of course the Return of the Lord. The closer we get to the end of time, the fiercer the opposition of the world, the flesh and the devil and the more we will need our times of corporate worship, but there are also lesser “days” before that day, including he said, the day of our death:

There is a trying day coming on us all, the day of our death, and we should observe all the signs of its approaching, and improve them to greater watchfulness and diligence in duty.³

I look at the signs in the world, I look at the decay of human society and human morals, I look at the increasingly vicious permission of the devil to harass the saints of God and I cannot help but believe, in every fibre of my being that our children will be the last generation to walk on planet earth in its present dispensation. I believe that my children will see their redeemer in the flesh upon the earth – I believe that, but, I am not an Apostle or an Old Testament prophet so don't sell your house or transfer your RRSP's into gold coin. Many are those before me who felt the same and yet the Lord tarries. But this I know, if my feelings are awry, and that Day is further off than I think, this still is true. You will die. You will get old, your body will fail, your mind will falter and struggle to hold on to the things you truly believe and you will increasingly, undoubtedly, NEED TO BE HERE. You will need the encouragement, the reminder, the love, the prayers, the correction, the instruction, the support and the intercession of this worshipping community. By the way – young people, I believe it particularly angers the Lord when we younger people are not worthy of that trust and cognisant of that sacred responsibility and what comes around goes around. If we are not faithful to the trust our parents and grandparents in this church place in us – if we disenfranchise them as soon as we “have the votes” then God have mercy on us when our children do the same to us. Let us show our children how to preserve priority space in corporate worship for our parents and grandparents with then the greater hope that they will do the same for us. You will need to be here then, even more than you do now.

³ Matthew Henry, *Acts To Revelation*, Matthew Henry's Commentary (New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1935), 935.

Praise God that because of Jesus Christ, his life, death, resurrection and session we can be here, we can behold the glory of the Lord as though in a mirror and we can be changed. By his grace and with his help, in the presence of many witnesses, we can walk and worship all this narrow way. This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.